

Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution

A political biography

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Modernization and conflict, 1969-1978

Almost nothing is known about what happened to Deng Xiaoping between the end of 1966 and October 1969. It appears he was struggled against for about a year and then kept in solitary confinement for almost another two. For example, he and Zhuo Lin were the focus of a 'struggle meeting' together with Liu Shaoqi and Wang Guangmei (Liu's wife) in July 1967.¹ However, the decade after Deng was released from imprisonment in 1969 was extremely eventful. In the course of that decade he twice spent periods in internal exile, only to return on each occasion to the centre of the political stage and the highest levels of party leadership. Unlike the 1950s, when a spirit of unity could be relied upon within the CCP's leadership, the 1970s was a period of intense factionalism. The CCP leadership was increasingly divided over the results of the Cultural Revolution; the efficacy, or otherwise, of Mao's mobilizational approach to development; and the question of the succession to Mao. In this uncertain political environment Deng was helped by his past relationships, not only with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai but also with those who had been his colleagues and subordinates during the Sino-Japanese War and the War of Liberation.

JIANGXI DAYS

During 1967 and 1968 the Cultural Revolution severely disrupted the work of the CCP and the state administration. Even the direct intervention of the PLA in civilian politics from the beginning of 1967 was not an immediate check on the political chaos. The PLA was no more united in political terms than the CCP, and though under Lin Biao's direction (and in support of Mao) it was directed to 'restore order' it often ended up becoming embroiled in local factionalism. Order was eventually restored by early 1969, shortly before the CCP's 9th Congress was convened in April, but it was a very new political order. In particular, by 1969 civilian politics were heavily dominated by PLA officers. Of course, the relationship between the CCP and the PLA had always been very close, not least because of the communist path to power before 1949. Thus, most of those who held positions of leadership within the CCP between 1949 and the Cultural Revolution, and beyond to about 1985—essentially the first revolution generation of the PRC's leadership—had some army background in addition to their CCP experience.² However, the extent to which actively serving PLA officers had come to dominate the

CCP during the Cultural Revolution was a new development. Almost half (some 46 per cent) of the new CCP Central Committee elected in 1969 were concurrently in the PLA. If not exactly identical to a South American military junta, this was still an inordinately high involvement of military personnel in government.

The restoration of administrative order and the worsening Sino-Soviet relations across China's northern borders led in late 1969 to the decision to disperse all the CCP's purged leaders being held in Beijing to other parts of the country; allegedly the decision was taken on Lin Biao's specific orders. Despite its presentation in the Red Guard press, Deng's case had been differentiated from that of Liu Shaoqi and other pre-Cultural Revolution leaders, not least by Mao Zedong who is rumoured to have said something to that effect at the 9th CCP Congress. Certainly, Zhou Enlai seems to have gone considerably out of his way to ensure a suitable reception for Deng when he was sent out of Beijing in October 1969.³

Deng was sent to Xinjian County in Jiangxi Province where for three and a quarter years he was theoretically under house arrest in a former infantry academy whilst working part-time in a nearby tractor repair plant. With him went his wife, Zhuo Lin, and his step-mother, Xia Bogen. Of the three, Deng, at the age of 65, was undoubtedly the fittest and part of the mythology of this episode in Deng's life which was promoted during the 1980s is the picture of Deng cleaning, cutting wood and breaking up coal.⁴

Life was undoubtedly very hard for Deng and his family, particularly before the end of 1971. However, a remarkable feature of the time they spent in Xinjian is the extent to which local conditions were adapted by Deng's 'minders' to make life more comfortable within the parameters established by Beijing. Partly this may have been the result of Zhou Enlai's influence, or the genuine respect of the local people for Deng. The situation was almost certainly helped by the fact that the party secretary of the factory where Deng worked in Xinjian County had served under him during the Sino-Japanese War.

When Deng and his immediate family had arrived in Xinjian it had been under strict guard and instructions that limited their activities. Yet within a short while, a special path had been laid for Deng and his wife to cover the two kilometres from where they lived to the factory where they worked so that they would not have to walk on the public highway; it was whimsically dubbed the 'Deng Xiaoping trail' by the locals, alluding to the then Vietnam War and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Deng was allowed to keep chickens and he and Zhuo Lin started a vegetable garden. Deng was even instructed in how to make his own wine and spirits by a local woman.

Eventually he was even allowed to have his children move in with the rest of the family in Jiangxi. For Deng Pufang, the eldest son, this was rather important. During the Cultural Revolution Deng Pufang, who had been a physics student, had been expelled from the CCP and either thrown from an upper floor, or pushed down a flight of stairs according to another account, by Red Guards because his father was a 'capitalist roader'. The attack had left him paralysed, confined to a wheelchair, and living for a while in a welfare centre in Xi'an. In 1972 he was allowed to travel to Beijing, with his sister, Deng Rong, to receive proper medical treatment.

However, by then it was too late for remedial action. By the time Deng returned to Beijing in 1973 a total often members of his family had been reunited in Jiangxi.

In September 1971 Lin Biao died, probably but by no means certainly in an air crash over Mongolia after having unsuccessfully tried to hang on to power within the CCP. The news reached Xinjian and Deng Xiaoping on 5 November, when for the first time since the end of 1966 Deng and Zhuo Lin were invited to hear a political report. It appears that within a very short time the attitude of Deng's jailers changed dramatically for the better, not least because local party officials up to the provincial level started coming to call.

In early 1972 Mao Zedong attended the memorial meeting for Chen Yi who had just died. Chen had been a former military leader and foreign minister, as well as a close associate of Deng Xiaoping during the War of Liberation. They had fought together at the Battle of Zhengzhou, and during the Huai-hai Campaign and its aftermath. Mao apparently praised Chen Yi to his widow, and then went on to talk about the frailty of the leadership. He concluded by passing an apparently unprovoked favourable comment on Deng to the effect that his case belonged to 'the category of contradictions among the People' and therefore capable of peaceful resolution. Zhou Enlai, who was there at the time, relayed this message to Chen Yi's children and to Deng, and is reported to have publicized the incident as part of the lobby to have Deng reinstated as quickly as possible.⁵

In August 1972 Deng wrote to Mao Zedong and the CCP Central Committee, through Wang Dongxing, asking to be allowed to return to work. In Beijing it appears that Wang Zhen and Wang Jiaxiang both lobbied Mao on Deng's behalf, and at the beginning of March 1973 the CCP Central Committee passed a resolution which recalled Deng from Jiangxi. His first post-Cultural Revolution official public engagement was at an official banquet for Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, when he passed almost unnoticed at first by the Western press corps. This was in marked contrast to his first post-Cultural Revolution unofficial public activity. Finding himself back in Beijing at the end of March with some free time it appears he decided to attend a soccer match between a local team and a visiting foreign team. When he was spotted in the crowd an ovation broke out that lasted for some time and could not be stopped until he acknowledged the applause.⁶

THE 'FOUR MODERNIZATIONS'

Several explanations have been provided for Deng's reinstatement and rehabilitation in 1973. The generational structure of the CCP leadership before the Cultural Revolution meant that it would be difficult to replace the large number of those who had been purged during 1967 to 1968 with enough administratively competent cadres within a reasonable period of time. Indeed, one remarkable aspect of the Cultural Revolution was its **inability to bring about generational change in the ranks of leading cadres.**⁷

Significantly, at approximately the same time that Deng was rehabilitated other leaders who had also been in disgrace or criticized during the Cultural Revolution disgrace or criticized during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated or brought back into active service, including two others who also might be thought of, like Deng,

as members of Mao's personal loyalty group from before 1949: Chen Yun and Tan Zhenlin. Lin Biao's death and the subsequent removal of his supporters from the CCP and the PLA may have left Mao feeling that the new leadership was not balanced in the way he would prefer between the more radical forces of Jiang Qing and the more moderating influences of Zhou Enlai. Zhou Enlai, for his part, may have felt, not without considerable reason, that Deng would be an ally against dogma and radicalism within the leadership.

All these explanations probably contain an element of truth. In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that there was considerable goodwill extended towards Deng generally within the leadership. Although Deng and his civilian associates had been purged during the Cultural Revolution, one irony of the leadership changes of 1966-8 was that they had resulted in a disproportionately large number of Deng's former military colleagues and subordinates—from the Taihang Region, the 129th Division of the 8th Route Army and the 2nd Field Army of the PLA which grew out of it—being promoted to leadership posts, particularly those which had a military connection, as many even civilian posts did by the early 1970s. In part this was because the changes wrought by Lin Biao (of the 4th Field Army) had come as the result of attacks on the Field Army groupings associated with Peng Dehuai, and He Long, one of Lin Biao's bitterest enemies.⁸ Simply because 2nd Field Army officers were relatively numerous, and there were far fewer 4th Field Army officers, the former were often appointed to fill the vacuum caused by the ravages of the Cultural Revolution.⁹ With the removal from the leadership of Lin Biao and his supporters after 1971 that disproportion was magnified still further.

Of course, loyalty ties of this kind are not an exclusive or particularly precise predictor of political or factional activity. Deng Xiaoping's former subordinates in the Taihang Region of the late 1930s and early 1940s included Li Xuefeng, Xie Fuzhi and Ji Dengkui, all of whom were members of the CCP Political Bureau and all of whom were at different times regarded as Cultural Revolutionary radicals, as well as many who later supported his reform programme.¹⁰ However, by the beginning of 1973, when the Political Bureau had only sixteen active members, six—Liu Bocheng, Chen Xilian, Xu Shiyu, Su Zhenhua, Ji Dengkui and Li Desheng—had served with or under Deng in Taihang during the Sino-Japanese War. A seventh, Chen Yonggui, the peasant leader from Dazhai, had also been there at the same time but there is no evidence of particular personal or organizational contact with Deng.

Deng's appointment as Vice-Premier brought him into immediate conflict with the more radical elements of the CCP leadership. Jiang Qing, and her associates Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen—later to be characterized as the 'Gang of Four'—derived the legitimacy of their position in the leadership from their close relationship to Mao and their emergence during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, throughout the 1970s until their arrest in October 1976 they campaigned strongly to protect what they regarded as the 'new-born experiences' of the Cultural Revolution: for example, the replacement of party committees and people's governments by revolutionary committees; the encouragement of 'open door schooling' (learning on the job) rather than any technical training; and positive discrimination in social, educational and economic activities for those classified as soldiers, workers or peasants. Deng not only had a wider and more independent legitimacy in the history of the CCP, he also remained opposed to the excesses of the politics of mobilization.¹¹

On the eve of the 10th CCP Congress, shortly after Deng's recall, the Gang of Four, undoubtedly concerned by the prospect of Deng and Zhou Enlai working together again, launched oblique attacks on them both, disguised as criticism of the now-departed Lin Biao. This opposition intensified when Deng was reappointed to the CCP's Political Bureau and Military Affairs Commission at the end of 1973 (he had been elected to the 10th Central Committee along with a number of other prominent victims of the Cultural Revolution in August) and was to continue for the next three years. In the context of the coming succession to Mao, for the latter was increasingly ill and frail for the remainder of his life after the 10th CCP Congress, Deng, despite his own advanced years, was seen as the main rival. Thus, when Deng led a delegation to the United Nations in 1974, where he spoke on Mao's 'Theory of the three worlds', he was criticized, together with Zhou, by Jiang Qing on his return for their handling of foreign affairs.¹²

At the end of 1974 relations between Deng and the Gang of Four worsened, not least as a result of Zhou Enlai's deteriorating health: he was seriously ill and hospitalised much of the time. Deng replaced Zhou as the person responsible for overseeing the routine work of the CCP and the government, and was appointed 1st Vice-Premier, Vice-Chairman of the CCP, and Chief-of-Staff of the PLA. From this position he was able, under Zhou's guidance, to do much to set what he saw as the necessary new policy agendas. Although his activities were necessarily constrained, he was able to have a few of his pre-Cultural Revolution associates, notably Hu Yaobang, brought back into active service. In a particularly astute move he also engineered the return of cadres, such as Hu Qiaomu who had previously been a subordinate in the CCP Secretariat before the Cultural Revolution, thereby presumably hoping to rapidly develop a new coalition for the future. The Hu Qiaomu case is particularly instructive because Hu Qiaomu had been an early and vociferous critic of Deng Xiaoping at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Under Deng's co-ordination and with the assistance of other leaders, as well as the support of the State Planning Commission, as in the early 1960s a series of policy reports were commissioned.¹³

Deng and Zhou's new policy agenda was referred to as the 'Four Modernizations' and took its cue from Zhou Enlai's 'Report on the work of the government' presented to the National People's Congress in January 1975. Here Zhou referred to the very general idea he had articulated in 1964, with Mao's support, that China should ensure the 'comprehensive modernization of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology before the end of the century'.¹⁴ Deng

organized a series of meetings and conferences during 1975 at which the goals and methods of achieving the Four Modernizations were discussed. A series of documents were drafted—three of which, dealing with the general problem of economic modernization, industrialization, and the development of science and technology, were later criticized by the Gang of Four as 'Three poisonous weeds'.¹⁵

Deng himself spoke out on the need to modernize the PLA, railway transport, and the iron and steel industry. The essence of his vision was the almost complete negation of Mao's politics of mobilization and the Cultural Revolution. Deng and his supporters emphasized the importance of classroom education, and of providing

workers and peasants with material incentives to encourage them to produce more rather than relying largely on ideology and exhortation. It was argued that China should abandon its policy of economic self-reliance and expand its foreign trade. In particular, it was suggested that the PRC should export raw materials such as coal and oil, as well as manufactured chemical products (mainly coal by-products), in order to import 'high-grade, high precision, advanced technology and equipment to speed up the technical transformation of our industries and to raise the productivity of labour'. The PLA was criticized, and not just from outside its ranks—Deng was currently Chief-of-Staff—for its 'bloating, laxity, conceit, extravagance, and inertia' which, given the role of the PLA in the CCP's tradition, and especially in Mao's vision, was sailing very close to the wind indeed. Even closer perhaps was Deng's stated desire to see quality and gradualism replace quantity and speed in economic production.¹⁶

THE TIANANMEN INCIDENT, 1976

Deng's critique of the Cultural Revolution was by no means confined to economic development. Once again, he returned to his constant preoccupations with party leadership and party discipline, which he described as having been threatened and destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. Under cover of attacking Lin Biao, he in effect criticized the dependence on the power of Mao Zedong's words that the Cultural Revolution had created. His argument was essentially that Mao Zedong Thought could not be reduced to just a few quotations, and that he disapproved of 'Lin Biao's vulgarization of Mao Zedong Thought'. This was simply the 'fragmentation of Mao Zedong Thought' which resulted in the CCP's becoming 'divorced from reality and the masses'.¹⁷ In his view Mao Zedong Thought had to be constantly tested in practice, though he did not yet, as he was to do in 1978, refer back to Mao's much earlier comment on the need to 'seek truth from facts'.

As at the 8th CCP Congress in 1956, Deng advocated a rectification of the CCP according to the principles originally articulated by the party during the early 1940s. Indeed, on a number of occasions he made specific reference to the party's heritage from the Sino-Japanese War. According to Deng, the CCP had more recently omitted 'to integrate theory with practice, maintain close ties with the masses, and practise self-criticism'. The results were that the CCP had become

characterized by factionalism, and there was a shortage of suitable party officials, particularly at the basic level.

These comments were clearly not intended to appeal to Deng's opponents within the CCP leadership. However, as 1975 progressed he went further and called for a re-examination of the cases of those, like himself, who had been purged at the start of the Cultural Revolution. This was a direct threat to the position of those who owed their position in the leadership to those events and it eventually provided the opportunity, or at least one excuse, for his criticism in November 1975 and his later dismissal in 1976.¹⁸

Throughout 1975 the radical elements within the CCP leadership had tried to keep Deng in check. In March and April, Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao launched an attack on Deng's policies by claiming that, if followed,

they would lead to the restoration of capitalism in China. In particular, Deng's proposal that there should be an incentive scheme to improve production was characterized as the thin edge of the wedge as far as the dilution of socialism and its replacement by capitalism were concerned.¹⁹ Though unnamed, Deng and Zhou were characterized as revisionists and 'rightists' who opposed Mao Zedong's vision.

Later in the year Deng was more specifically targeted in a trial by allegory that became front-page news. The lack of open and institutionalized politics, particularly during the Mao-dominated era of Chinese politics, meant that contemporary political debate was often presented as reinterpretations of history or classical literature. In this case, the focus was on the famous *Water Margin* story and one of its heroes, Song Jiang. Song Jiang is immensely popular in Chinese culture, China's equivalent in many ways of Robin Hood, an outlaw who eventually takes service with the Emperor. The debate, which started during late 1975, was about whether Song Jiang should be viewed more critically than was usually the case for having capitulated to the establishment. For 'Song Jiang' the Chinese public was to read 'Deng Xiaoping', under attack for capitulating to capitalism.

For most of 1975 it appears that Deng was able to call on Mao's approval for his actions. Mao was ill and dying at this time, and it is possible that he may not have had a clear grasp of what was going on in the wider politics around him. However, as Deng's proposals to reverse the Cultural Revolution gathered pace, so did Mao's concerns, particularly when Deng argued that the cases of those criticized at that time should be re-examined—or at least when this was brought specifically to Mao's attention. At a meeting of the CCP Political Bureau in early November, Deng was suspended from all his responsibilities except in foreign affairs—where he had taken responsibility for negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USA and led a delegation to France. There followed a political campaign with a highly specific target against the 'Right deviation of reversing correct verdicts': in short being Deng Xiaoping and wanting the CCP to revise its recent history and current policies.

Deng's particular problems came to a head quickly as his long-term protector, Zhou Enlai, died on 8 January 1976. Sensibly Deng realized that his political existence was extremely precarious, at least in the immediate future, and his speech in Zhou's memory was not, as it easily might have been, concerned with the present. Instead Deng stuck almost stolidly to recounting Zhou's revolutionary achievements. For the post-1949 period he mentioned only two aspects of Zhou's work in particular: his work in foreign affairs, and his support for Chairman Mao.²⁰

At the end of January Deng Xiaoping tried to present a report on the work of the government and economic planning to a Central Work Conference. The meeting was scheduled for a lengthy discussion, but rapidly disintegrated into an attack on Deng himself. Deng was forced once again to examine his past career and sign yet another 'self-criticism'. However, unlike his 'self-criticisms' of 1966, this time confession was designed to portray a long-time 'counter-revolutionary'. Most of these charges had been raised during the Cultural Revolution, but this time the thrust of the 'self-criticism' was historical. Deng's problems of 1931 involving the 7th Red Army were raised once again, as were accusations that he had supported Wang Ming and the 'rightist'

line after 1937, that he had consorted with the Nationalist Party in the 1940s, that he had launched the ‘Hundred Regiments Campaign’ against Mao’s wishes in 1940, had favoured rich peasants during land reform, had developed an ‘Independent Kingdom’ in the South-west when he was that region’s CCP First Secretary, had taken Mao’s name out of the CCP Constitution in 1956, and transgressed in various ways in the 1960s and during the Cultural Revolution.²¹

Mao Zedong had apparently at some stage approved not only Deng’s dismissal but also his criticism by name.²² Deng’s position as the successor to both Mao and Zhou was formally taken by Hua Guofeng, a provincial party secretary who had risen to national prominence during the Cultural Revolution. In January 1976, when Zhou Enlai died, he was appointed Acting Premier and placed in charge of the CCP Central Committee’s daily routine. He attempted to cement his new position at the end of February with the first explicit criticism of Deng Xiaoping by name since his recall after the Cultural Revolution.²³ That the move to shunt Deng aside met with considerable confusion and resistance was to become clear very shortly. None the less, radical attacks on Deng and his policies, and the memory of Zhou Enlai, continued. On 28 March, the Shanghai newspaper *Wenhui Bao* carried a lead article which criticized Zhou Enlai and Deng respectively as ‘that capitalist-reader within the party who had wanted to reinstate in power the capitalist-reader who had been overthrown and is unrepentant to this day’.

Reaction to the *Wenhui Bao* article in Nanjing, capital of Jiangsu Province, was intense. There were mass demonstrations against the dishonouring of Zhou Enlai’s memory, and for Deng and the Four Modernizations.²⁴ A few days later, as news of the Nanjing Incident (as it became known) spread to Beijing, the same was to happen there. The 4th of April 1976 was *Qing Ming*, or the Festival of Sweeping the Graves, when Chinese traditionally pay homage to the dead. It provided an excellent opportunity to organize demonstrations in memory of Zhou Enlai, and by extension in support of Deng Xiaoping, and against the largely unpopular Gang of Four. Crowds flocked to Tiananmen Square in the middle of Beijing on 4 April with floral wreaths to Zhou Enlai, and poems making political points about Zhou and Jiang Qing, all of which were placed round the Revolutionary Martyrs Memorial in the centre of the square.

On the evening of 4 April, the area was cleared of the wreaths and poems by local security forces. Popular reaction on 5 April was extremely hostile, and it was not long before the fast-gathering crowd turned violent. Its targets were those associated with the Gang of Four and the repressive power of the state. Thus, at least one student from Qinghua University in Beijing, where the Cultural Revolution radicals had established a ‘think-tank’, was strung up and hanged from a lamp-post. A police station on the south of the square was set on fire. Towards evening there were several ugly scenes and the crowd was only dispersed by the use of force. Public security forces were called in by the Mayor of Beijing, Wu De, with the assistance of the Minister of Public Security (as well as acting Premier) Hua Guofeng, and the commander of the guard unit attached to the CCP Political Bureau, Wang Dongxing, all of whom were members of the Political Bureau.

Meeting on 6 and 7 April 1976, the CCP Political Bureau denounced the demonstrations as a ‘counter-revolutionary incident’ for which Deng was held responsible, dismissed Deng from all his posts in the CCP and government, and appointed Hua Guofeng as First Vice-Chairman of the CCP and Premier of the State Council.

²⁵ Carefully stage-managed demonstrations followed in which Deng’s supporters from organizations all over Beijing, but from the central economic planning institutions in particular, were forced to march round Tiananmen Square denouncing him. Though the Tiananmen Square demonstrations only lasted a few days, for several months Deng was characterized in the media in almost identical terms to those used during the Cultural Revolution as ‘the bourgeoisie within the communist party’, and the three major reports prepared in 1975 continued to be denounced as the ‘Three poisonous weeds’. At the same time, other veteran cadres who had long been associated with Deng, notably two of his erstwhile bridge partners, Hu Yaobang and Wan Li, were forced out of office as they had been in the Cultural Revolution.

THE 3rd PLENUM OF THE 11th CCP CENTRAL COMMITTEE

Though the official media may have treated Deng as it had during the Cultural Revolution, Deng did not otherwise suffer as he had earlier. One of those who immediately offered protection, judging that a Mao-engineered situation was once again likely to get out of hand, was Ye Jianying. Ye was a Marshall of the PLA, a senior member of the CCP Political Bureau, and the Minister of National Defence, who shortly after Deng’s recall in 1973 had made clear to Deng his support for change and his opposition to the Gang of Four. Deng went south where Ye, through his and Deng’s personal connections, could offer protection. Ye was a Guangdong native and maintained good relations in his home province even during all the years he worked in Beijing.²⁶ The commander of the Guangzhou (Canton) Military Region was Xu Shiyou, also a member of the CCP

Political Bureau, and a former subordinate of Deng’s from the Sino-Japanese War.

China’s politics were clearly extremely unstable and unreal at the time. Everyone seemed to know Mao was dying, and that the Gang of Four would be looking to consolidate their position against considerable opposition, yet on the surface nothing was happening. On 9 September 1976 Mao Zedong died, and the question of the succession—both in terms of people and of policies—finally had to be settled. Despite their aspirations, the Gang of Four had for the most part during the 1970s successfully alienated both their own social constituency and any other potential support within the party leadership. The result was that their relationship with Mao Zedong had become almost their only base of support. Within a month of his death, the other members of the CCP Political Bureau had met separately and decided to act. They moved to arrest the Gang of Four and elected Hua Guofeng Chairman of the CCP.²⁷

Deng’s position, despite being formally outside the leadership, was almost impregnable. From the moment Mao died Deng Xiaoping was considered the leader in exile, and from the moment the Gang of Four were arrested, Deng was the leader in waiting. A major source of his political power was paradoxically precisely the kind of legitimacy the Gang of Four had attempted to claim—and Hua Guofeng was soon to attempt to claim—through

their closeness to Mao and particularly their self-appointed positions as 'guardians of Mao Zedong Thought'. However, Deng Xiaoping had been closer to Mao Zedong and those who supported him in the leadership—and particularly those who had supported him well before the Cultural Revolution—for considerably longer than any of those in the Gang of Four, or even the group that supported Hua Guofeng. His claim to leadership was firmly grounded in his relationship to Mao.²⁸ Those who had been Mao's victims and wanted change turned to him for leadership; others regarded Deng as the almost 'natural' post-Mao leader because the long-term relationship between Deng and Mao, and Deng's intense loyalty, were tangible manifestations of the revolution in which they had all participated. At the same time, Deng had decades worth of organizational and political associations which he could, and did, mobilize for political support, as for example from his time in the CCP Secretariat before the Cultural Revolution and his work as a Vice-Premier since his return in 1973. In addition, and in particular, these included not only the former supporters and protégés of Zhou Enlai but also his own not inconsiderable connections through the experience of the former Taihang Region and the 2nd Field Army.

In exile in Guangzhou Deng had reportedly outlined three conditions which he insisted should be met before he was prepared to be rehabilitated once again. He insisted that the Tiananmen Incident of April, and his role in it, should be reconsidered; that he should be reinstated in the positions he held before the end of 1975; and that his reinstatement should be approved by both a National People's Congress and a CCP Congress. Though he was to reappear in public before all three conditions were met in full, by the end of 1978 they had all been fulfilled.²⁹

The delay, and indeed the source of most of the problems generally at this time, was that Chinese politics could not be readily freed from the influence of ten years of Cultural Revolution. One immediate problem was that Deng's return was necessarily related to Hua Guofeng's future, since the latter had only become First Vice-Chairman of the CCP because of Deng's dismissal at the end of 1975. Another was that the CCP leadership had to decide how much of the Cultural Revolution it was going to reject. At the same time many of those in the leadership owed their position to the Cultural Revolution in some way. Even if they had been prepared to move against the Gang of Four it did not necessarily follow that they would also be prepared to reject all or even most of the Cultural Revolution.

Deng wrote to Hua Guofeng almost immediately after the latter's confirmation as Chairman of the CCP on 10 October 1976, requesting permission to go back to work.³⁰ Chen Yun, Li Xiannan, Ye Jianying and Wang Zhen (who had lobbied Mao on Deng's behalf in 1972 and was now Vice-Premier) were loud in their calls for his return. Hua Guofeng stalled on the holding of a CCP Central Committee meeting where these pressures would undoubtedly lead to a resolution for Deng's return. Whilst one obvious explanation of this political behaviour was the desire to reinforce his own extremely vulnerable political position, another more charitable interpretation might argue that Hua was also acting to preserve maximum unity within the leadership of the CCP at a difficult period in its evolution.³¹

An attempt to build a 'personality cult' around Hua was launched through the official media. Considerable publicity was afforded Hua's quasi-official appointment by Mao as the latter's successor on 30 April when Mao was reported to have told Hua, 'With you in charge, I am at ease'. In January 1977, building on this relationship with Mao, Hua suggested that 'We must resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and unswervingly carry out whatever Chairman Mao instructed' in order to strengthen his legitimacy. Wang Dongxing wrote a joint editorial for *People's Daily*, *Red Flag* and *Liberation Army Daily* which appeared on 7 February extolling the virtues of this position, now known as the 'Two whatevers'. Hua's position was supported by several other members of the leadership, who though they had not been followers of the Gang of Four none the less owed their positions for the most part to promotion during the Cultural Revolution.

However, the tide was running too fast against Hua—not least because after Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four those who had been the victims of the Cultural Revolution were being rehabilitated in increasing numbers. In addition, Hua needed to call a CCP Central Committee meeting in order to legitimize the arrest of the Gang of Four and to confirm his own position. Moreover, Deng, who probably knew more about Mao's policy decisions and instructions than anyone else then in the CCP's Political Bureau, started campaigning, albeit obliquely, both on his own behalf and against the concept of the 'Two whatevers'. According to the authorized history of the CCP, Deng started 'canvassing' his 'comrades' views' only to find that they, like he, did not believe that this was the correct approach to Mao Zedong Thought.³² In March, a Central Work Conference was enthusiastic in calling for Deng's recall, agreed to his reinstatement to all the positions he had held at the end of 1975, but left the time of his recall to Hua Guofeng. An exchange of correspondence followed from Deng to Hua and Ye Jianying in April, in which Deng once again pushed home the point about the importance of not 'vulgarizing Mao Zedong Thought' and treating it as 'doctrine' but regarding it as a more flexible and ideological system.³³ The stage was then set for a meeting of the CCP Central Committee and both Deng's return to active politics and Hua's confirmation as Chairman of the CCP. It was to be a hollow victory for Hua.

Deng's reinstatement was timed for the 3rd plenum of the 10th Central Committee of the CCP in July 1977 where he immediately attacked the basic epistemological point about Mao Zedong Thought. On the whole he ignored Hua Guofeng's 'Two whatevers' but was scathing about the Gang of Four and Lin Biao. He differentiated between their behaviour and politics and those of Mao Zedong, and moreover drew the legitimacy for his position from Mao's inscription for the Central Party School in Yan'an—'Seek truth from facts'.³⁴

It was a debate that was followed up rapidly at the 11th Congress of the CCP in August. Hua's speech to the conference brought this particular Cultural Revolution to an end by promising that 'in line with Mao Zedong Thought' it would not be the only one and there would be more in the future. Moreover, in defending the principle of Cultural Revolution he emphasized Mao's correctness in targeting 'capitalist-readers'. Deng, in contrast, by stressing the need to revive the CCP's traditions and work-style, promised the opposite.³⁵ Indeed, by the end of the year Deng had already started to implement the plans that had been on the drawing board since at least 1975, with the introduction of a scheme for the modernization of the PLA.

In March 1978 the second of Deng's conditions for his recall was fulfilled when the 5th National People's Congress met in Beijing. By that time a 'Counter Cultural Revolution' was already well under way. Following Mao's death there had been a dramatic turnover in the leadership, as great as that which had occurred at the height of the Cultural Revolution. However, this time it was those who had been dismissed or removed from office during 1967-8 who were returned to power, and unsurprisingly their support went to Deng and those campaigning for a full rejection of the Cultural Revolution.³⁶

Deng's position during 1978 was so secure that he was able to visit a number of countries in East and South-east Asia; to finalize arrangements for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USA (which he had been responsible for negotiating during 1974-5); and to announce new policies on intellectuals and education which in effect reversed those of the Cultural Revolution. At the same time he continued to build his coalition for change, and Hu Yaobang played a central role. He organized a writing group at the Central Party School to rewrite an essay by Hu Fuming of Nanjing University as 'Practice is the sole criterion of truth' which came to provide the ideological basis for the changes to come.³⁷ It took its cue from Mao's Yan'an injunction to 'seek truth from facts' which Deng had already been emphasizing for some time. Essentially it argued that the importance of Mao Zedong Thought was in the perspectives and general principles it provided, not in the letter of its quotations, and that 'only the test of social practice can show whether a theory actually works'.³⁸ In this case the test of theory rapidly gathered the necessary support from senior and influential figures in the CCP's leadership, including Lo Ruiqing (shortly before his death in August) and Li Xiannian.³⁹

In 1977 it had been necessary for Deng to admit that he had committed mistakes. By the end of 1978 the criticisms of CCP leaders were increasingly focusing on the 'mistakes' of those who had supported the 'Two whatevers'. The immediate climax came at the landmark 3rd plenum of the 11th Central Committee and the Central Work Conference which preceded it. Together they lasted for most of November and December in an atmosphere of high excitement. In addition to the work conference, border tensions with Vietnam were increasing; it was announced that diplomatic relations were to be established with the USA; and a 'Democracy Movement', no doubt inspired by events at the Central Work Conference, developed on Beijing's streets.

The Central Work Conference must have been one of the most remarkable in the history of the CCP and has certainly been presented that way since, as it signalled the final rejection of the Cultural Revolution and the start of the reform era. It decided to make economic modernization the most important priority; to introduce political, administrative and legal reforms designed to support economic modernization; to reverse the verdicts on a number of key pre-Cultural Revolution leaders of the CCP who had not yet been rehabilitated, including Deng's former close associates Bo Yibo, Peng Zhen and Yang Shangkun, as well as Tao Zhu and Peng Dehuai; to restore party democracy; to decollectivize agriculture; and, after a preliminary assessment, to carry out a more thorough-going reassessment of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁰ It also met the third of Deng's conditions for his recall and declared that the Tiananmen Incident, far from being 'counter-revolutionary', was 'a completely revolutionary event' by ratifying a decision taken in the middle of November by the Beijing CCP Committee.⁴¹

Though all the outcomes of the 3rd plenum were not immediately apparent at the time, in effect Hua Guofeng had lost the battle to maintain his leadership of the CCP to Deng, whatever formal position the latter held. The policies on economic modernization he had supported in the early 1960s and again in the mid-1970s could now be implemented, and the team that had co-operated in their design was now together again in command of the CCP and the economy. The policies on party leadership and party discipline that Deng had tirelessly advocated since the 1950s could now be given their first real chance since the 1940s to be put into practice. For Deng the 3rd plenum was undoubtedly a great success, but the real challenge—of putting his vision into practice—still lay ahead.